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ABSTRACT

For years, reading teachers in the schools have emphasized word identification skills and believed that reading is comprised of a set of subskills that a child must master before he or she can learn to read. To teach a child to read, however, instruction must focus on comprehension. Therefore, word attack skills should be taught in conjunction with comprehension and applied in a meaningful context. When teaching reading, comprehension teachers should talk about the passage first, exploring with children how the events are related, how the author structured the story, and the words the author used to indicate relationships. The teacher can show the relationship of ideas and how sentences interrelate by taking a story and rewriting it a line at a time. Each line would be presented to the children with opportunity for discussion. Teachers can also show children that context helps one to predict much more than would the initial letter of a word or its length. In this way teachers can teach children how to use mental strategies to help them read unknown words. The use of cloze procedure and the avoidance of the use of worksheets are other helpful teaching strategies. Teachers can make reading easy by making sure that activities and materials presented to students are meaningful, by helping them to read, by giving them opportunity to engage in meaningful reading, by reading to them and with them, and by not interfering with the learning to read process by confronting the students with nonsense. (HOD)

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READING AND COMPREHENSION

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READING AND COMPREHENSION

The whole goal of reading is comprehension. It is absolutely essential that children are very much concerned with getting the meaning out of the squiggles on the page. The squiggles themselves do not convey meaning--the meaning is in the mind of the reader. (Witness one person reading a passage or letter, and laughing, while another reads the same passage and cries! The meaning was certainly not on the page itself.) Other examples of this can be found in some of the following passages:

INSERT SAMPLE PASSAGES HERE
Figure 1

In order to "read" any of these passages, the reader has to bring a lot of information to the page. In the first passage, no information is possible because it is nonsense. Therefore, there is no comprehension, even though a teacher might ask: "Who is Blit?" And a child could answer "Blit is a borf." What do Gloopy and Blit do?" "They klum." Of course, it is obvious that the child is not comprehending. In the last passage, unless one knows about building airplanes, one could not bring comprehension to the page. (Often readers lacking in background, think this passage is about grain elevators!) If there is not meaning being generated in the mind, then all the reader is doing is calling out words. The reader has to comprehend the words as parts of sentences, and the sentences as parts of paragraphs.

Figure 1
Sample Passages

Gloopy is a borp. Blit is a lof. Gloopy klums like Blit. Gloopy and blit are floms.

(from: Goodman, K.S. Language and Thinking in the Elementary School)

The coefficient of concordance, W, expresses the average agreement on a scale from .00 to 1.00 between the ranks. There are two ways to define W. The Kendell method will be presented first. According to this method W can be expressed as the ratio between the between-groups sum of squares and the total sum of squares of a complete anaylsis of variance of the ranks.

(from: Kerlinger, F. Foundations of Behavioral Research)

When the ribs of the elevator are properly aligned, the trailing edge is installed and the gussets affixed. It is necessary of course that the grain meets government specifications and is properly located in each of these operations.

For years, emphasis with teaching reading in the schools has been on word identification skills. This is a very entrenched idea, but if we want to teach a child to read, we must change the focus to comprehension. We must also change our method of instruction. And we must be confident enough in ourselves as professionals (not technicians) to be able to change our method of instruction to suit the problem.

The two basic assumptions that seem to be hang ups are:

1. that the problem is with word identification, and
2. that reading is comprised of a set of subskills of which mastery is important before a child can learn to read.

When these two assumptions are believed and acted upon, then reading becomes fragmented into "word identification skills" taught one after the other to the child. Research shows that knowledge of subskills is not as important as being able to integrate the skills. An example of this is the child who is in grade six and just realizes that phonics can help him to attack a word "Oh, you can use this to help attack words." He knew the "rules" and could do the exercises, but had no idea how to transfer the knowledge to an actual reading situation. This is the result of teachers slavishly following reading Manuals. What is important is not knowledge of a lot of subskills, but the ability to integrate or orchestrate all the language skills needed to read. There are not reading skills. The whole process of reading is <u>a skill</u>. Reading is a skill in the orchestration of knowledge over time, for the purpose of getting meaning from print. We have to "get it all together." Like a child learning to swim, it is not enough to learn how to move arms, then legs, then breathing. He has to be able to stay afloat and moving when he is in water over his head. No matter who writes the Manuals,

and no matter how the publishers or departments or education "drum them up," they can only be a general help in teaching reading. When a teacher slavishly follows a reading Manual she will be sure to get unchanging, monotonous, bored reading lessons--dull routine, and also no transfer into a realistic reading situation. The teacher has to relate the information in the manual to her own children. She should follow some suggestions, adapt others, omit many others, and add her own. Otherwise he/she is just a technician, not a professional. The bus driver, janitor or an interested parent can follow the Manual! As a professional, the teacher should be able to make use of all the knowledge about language that the child brings to school with him/her.

Children have a lot of knowledge that will enable them to negotiate the text, even before they come to school. All children have this knowledge: 1) They understand the world at large--the physical and social world--human emotions, human actions; 2) They have a knowledge of the syntax or grammar of the language. They would never say "Cake the eat" or "chased the dog cat the," nor even "See the red, big house." They would recognize these are "wrong" or that they do not "sound right"; 3) They know the structure and rhythm patterns that characterize the language, and also those that characterize prose and poetry--witness how babies can imitate intonation patterns long before they can say words; 4) They even have some knowledge of phonics (one little child read "Joey Kangaroo" as "the Jumping Kangaroo"); 5) They have knowledge of the lexicon and meanings of words: food, clothing, transportation, customs, rituals, relationships, motives, feelings, plans; 6) They have a concept of what reading is (and a much more intelligent concept than the ones they learn in school and from publishing

companies' books). For instance, they do quasi-reading (go through the motions of reading) turning the pages, running their eye along the page, sometimes pointing with their finger, and saying something. But of course they can't match the oral and written code. But they pretend to read. And what is more, they "read" using the language of books. The rhythm of the written language or how they quasi-read, is quite different from the rhythm of their oral language or how they speak. They might read "Father said, 'Come here'" as "Dad said, 'Run fast'." Or "Run, run, run. Come and find something," as "Run fast, run fast. Come and find something that you want." But the structure they use is the structure of written language, even though they have never studied it.

Good readers expect the text to make sense. Good readers and poor readers both make mistakes, but the good reader is always asking two questions (consciously or unconsciously): 1) Does this make sense? 2) Does it sound right? For example, the following sentence read by both a good reader and a poor reader illustrate how one reader is striving for meaning, while the other is using phonics:

Quietly a stable where the
~~Quickly~~ Tom led the horse to ~~safety just as the~~
friendly was resting.
~~frightened~~ milkman ~~returned~~.

Quick house safe
~~Quickly~~ Tom led the ~~horse~~ to ~~safety~~ just as the
fron rid.
~~frightened~~ milkman ~~returned.~~

Good readers (as opposed to poor readers), in striving for meaning, make use of the redundancy in the language to help them understand, and they use this along with their knowledge that the function of language is to convey meaning. For example, in the following illustration, a good reader could make use of the syntactic, semantic and grapho-phonic redundancy in the language:

> Last summ .. a friend of .... watch .. a David-and-
> ..... battle ..... two bird.

Even with every other word left out, a reader who is aware that one can use the cues within the language itself is at an advantage when trying to read the passage. For example,

> In _____ when _____ had _____ snowing, _____
> about _____ o'clock, _____ grandmother _____
> feeling _____. So _____ brother _____ I _____
> to _____ drugstore _____ get _____ medicine
> _____ her.

Poor readers do not appear to view reading as a communication process. And they do not seem to be able to integrate their knowledge of phonics, structural analysis, and the other word attack skills, with making the context make sense. They do not appear to realize that reading involves an interaction of the reader with written language to reconstruct, to some degree, a message encoded by the author. To do this, the reader has to make use of <u>both</u> the graphic symbols on the page, and his own background knowledge. Too much focus on the graphic symbols with little recourse to language and meaning will make a poor reader. The better readers can make more effective use of both kinds of information to comprehend written language. So in

order to develop good readers, the schools must focus more on the comprehension of written language, rather than on the decoding of individual words. As illustrated above, a reader does not have to read every word in order to read effectively. A good reader does not even have to "look carefully" at each word in order to read. A good reader makes "errors" also, but never are these so-called errors inconsistent with the meaning of the passage. Teachers then must strive for a better balance between teaching word attack skills and teaching comprehension. Word attack cannot be entirely ignored because the readers must construct a message similar to what the author intended. However, comprehension must be constantly kept in mind as the main goal of reading. Therefore, any word attack skills should be taught in conjunction with comprehension, and applied in a meaningful context.

What the children really need is instruction on how to process written language. This is much more than just questioning the children after they read the passage. In the sentence mentioned previously, "Gloopy klums like Blit," a child could answer the question "What does Gloopy do?" without any comprehension whatsoever. Readers can often recall key words or key ideas in a passage, but then reconstruct the meaning around their own experiences. An example of this can be found in workbooks purporting to teach comprehension, under the heading "teaching sequence." The most common type of exercise is numbering in order. This is not teaching at all, but only practice for those children who can read well and who have the background necessary to complete the exercise. What the child really needs is someone to teach him how ideas are related. For instance, in teaching sequence, do the first part of the teaching orally, and make use of cues to indicate

sequence, i.e. first, then, after that, finally, etc. Next use a short written paragraph and work with the children to discover the word cues the author used to indicate sequence.

> Charlene followed the directions for making a paper flower. First she folded some bright orange paper. Next she cut some curves. After that she tied the center. Finally she fluffed out the petals.
>
> (Croft skill packs)

When teaching any type of reading comprehension, talk about the passage first. Explore with the children how the events are related, how the author structured his story, and the words he used to indicate relationships.

Another type of "comprehension exercise" found in workbooks is "teaching main idea." Again, the exercises are only practice for the children who can already read well. No teaching is involved. Usually the child is asked to underline a good title for this story or passage. What the child really needs is to be taught how to find main ideas. Of course to do this, the teacher needs a passage with a main idea in it! This requires careful selection--to come up with a short passage that has a main idea. Teach the children that only certain kinds of writing have main ideas--when the author wants to drive home a point, or teach a lesson. Newspapers, fables, legends, and short pithy comments on life are best to use for this type of teaching. Again, do everything orally first before you ask the child to find the main idea in a short written passage. Then show the children how sometimes the author starts with the main idea and organizes

his writing around this. Or sometimes he ends his writing with the main idea. From this, move to passages that are not so clearly delineated. What the teacher needs to focus on is the relationship of the ideas, instead of just word attack skills. The mental strategies used in comprehension should get the emphasis. To do this, a lot of oral discussion must take place about how the author is structuring his ideas. No amount of underlining or numbering can teach these mental strategies using language.

Another way to show relationship of ideas and how sentences interrelate would be to rewrite a story a line at a time, and present each line to the children, with opportunity for discussion. For example:

_____ listened for the sound of rustling leaves.

Ask the children to give you all the words they can think of that could be used in the blank. You will get "The dog," "The Animals," "The birds," "Mother," "John," "Mary," etc. Then produce the next line,

That would warn her of possible danger.

Now go back to the list and find those that still fit, discard those that do not fit now (i.e. any masculine references, any plural references, etc.). Ask for some new predictions and make an additional list. Then present another line:

She had been hiding from red fox, who had been hunting her all day.

This line would eliminate any reference to persons that the children had given. Ask for some other educated guesses. Finally expose the whole story or passage for the children to see.

Mother Rabbit listened for the sound of rustling leaves. That would warn her of possible danger. She was hiding from red fox, who had been hunting her all day. She had been running and "backtracking" all day to lead him away from her nest. In that nest were her four baby rabbits.

Discuss how, in order to read, one has to constantly shift one's mental categories, and constantly correct and recorrect these mental images as one reads along, constantly predicting, constantly guessing and correcting. The children have to realize that this is perfectly all right. They have to be encouraged to believe that there is no cut and dried way to think. The schools often give the children the impression that there is always a "right" answer. Therefore, the children who are good at guessing what the teacher is thinking are the ones who learn to play the game and survive in school.

You can also show the children that context--the language used in the print--helps one to predict much more than would the initial letter of the word, or the length of the word. An exercise to illustrate this might be the following:

How many words can you think of that start with

c

t

y

t

The children will come up with many, many words in each of these categories. Now say "If I give you the length of the word, it will further reduce the *number of alternatives, for example:*

c.....	y...
t...	i.

Further, if you can see these initial letters and lengths in context, then the alternatives are so reduced that only one word will fit in the proper context, i.e.

Listen c..... when I tell you a story.

My friends often t... about the fun they had on their camping trip.

Will y... father and mother let you go to the show?

I read an article i. the newspaper about that.

The decoding that good readers perform is not transforming visual symbols into sound, but transforming the visual symbols into language and meaning. In the sentence

The ..... landed the airplane

only a noun will fit. If one puts in the initial letter "p" then the alternatives are further reduced to a noun that starts with the letter "p." Because of the knowledge that the reader brings to the page, the unknown word can only be "pilot" (and not "pillow," or "politician," or "pal").

Take sentences similar to the above and discuss alternatives with the children, i.e. After putting on his socks, the man slipped on his _____ (could be boots, shoes, mocassins). The point is that the teacher will teach the children how to use mental strategies to help them to read unknown words.

The same type of exercises can be done by deleting verbs or adjectives or adverbs. Deleting prepositions and various function words are even easier, because the alternatives are fewer. The main thing is to have the children concentrating on getting meaning from the page by using their knowledge of how the language works. The focus should be on comprehension, using the syntax and semantics of the language that the children already possess in oral form. This is much more meaningful and sensible than having the children focus on word attack skills, and coming up with

cat-he-dral (cathedral) fat-her (father) went (want)

The teacher must also be sure that she is using natural reading situations. Worksheets are not natural situations. Nobody reads lists of words, so lists are not reading situations (unless one is going shopping).

Every child who can listen and speak, can learn to read. Focus on what the child can do and adapt your teaching. If we could throw out "reading levels" and "reading tests" and "reading worksheets" and talk instead about degrees of comprehension, then we would begin to look at reading as a way of learning, just as tasting, smelling, touching, listening and speaking are ways of learning.

Use of the cloze technique is a great way to teach comprehension. The teacher can choose what she wants to leave out. She can also choose how much she wants to omit. Then she will do short passages orally with the children, discussing possible alternatives, and demonstrating how the reader has to take a risk, and be willing to make mistakes, in order to get the right word. Mistakes must be looked upon as a learning situation.

We must make reading instructions as meaningful as possible so that the children can make sense out of it. No one can rely on a program to teach

reading. Reading is not taught by prescription. There are hundreds of reading programs, many of which have little relevance to reading. Learning to read does not lend itself to this kind of programming. A word by itself can be meaningless unless it forms part of a chunk of meaning.

The teacher can make reading easy by making sure that activities and materials presented to students are meaningful, by helping them read by giving them the opportunity to engage in meaningful reading, by reading to them, and with them, and by not interfering with the learning to read process by confronting the students with nonsense.

Teach the kids to guess at the word--always in terms of making sense, and sounding right. Teach them to use the word-order that they already know. We never say "a girl pretty" but "a pretty girl." Show them why punctuation is there in the print--that punctuation marks are signals to help the reader understand more easily. Teach them to use the function of the word (A ..... walk--the word "brisk" describes walk). Teach them to trust the print--that the print will always make sense. All too many children learn that sounding out is the only way to unlock an unknown word. And for those children for whom phonics makes no sense (and there are many of these) reading becomes a meaningless chore, a series of laborious sounds that do not lead to meaning.

Comprehension cannot be measured only in terms of "correct" answers to tight little questions. The important thing is that each child is pitting his own meaning against the author's and gradually coming to know what the story means for him. In order to teach comprehension, there must be a lot of discussion about what different children think the author is saying. These discussions will trigger off a whole hierarchy of meaning: from gross misunderstanding to precise verbalizing; from a simple restatement

of the story to the whole realm of living. The cross-pollenation that occurs in such discussions also invites children to question their own meanings and even to organize new meanings. Of course, you can't do this if your criterion is "absolutely no talking in this classroom." An example of this type of question might be (in a story about a young man) "How long is a person young?" Then be aware of the kind of thinking you want, the kind of language you want, and the kind of mental and emotional involvement you want. All of these aspects are present in a good reader (one who comprehends the material well).

Comprehension is understanding, and we don't have to instruct a child on the need to develop understanding. Everybody wants to understand. It is a natural state. And the teacher doesn't have to "test" for understanding--it will be apparent to her whether or not the child understands just by listening to what he/she has to say and by observing his/her behaviour.

Do not try to teach comprehension using worksheets. Use full length paragraphs with good content, and include much oral discussion before and after reading. If it is a text book the child has to understand, the teacher should use content outlines and do the whole schema for the children. (Also be aware that most textbooks are written by university professors in various areas, and are much too difficult for the children you are trying to teach!)

Be aware also that many of the reading textbooks the children have to use in school are very difficult to read because the authors have tried to make them easy! In doing this, they have butchered the language, and made it even more difficult. Some examples: Anaphoric devises. (Since nobody volunteered to do the dishes, gramma did.)

I've shovelled the snow and scraped the ice. Park here (adverb functioning as an anaphor).

Ellipsis: the omission of one or more words from a sentence) makes it difficult: Joey gave each of his friends an apple. They thank him for them. Dad took a boat out to get a fish. We hope to have it for supper (the boat or the fish?)

Roundabout language: You and I will run, we will run to the park (nothing about a race).

I am a sick lion. I can't smile. Dr. Kangaroo can help you. (No mention about a dentist, or a toothache.)

Or expressions like "He is in here" (and all the child has to go by for cues are pictures). All this makes reading comprehension very very difficult. Or: It is not a rocket. It is not a bus (and one only has pictures to go by). Or: I can see what turtle wants. Don't you see what turtle wants? This is very difficult to understand. There isn't even a picture for this one. And the poor students have to try to make sense out of this kind of stuff! No wonder they get perplexed.

Children are also asked to read stuff that has no story grammar in it, i.e. I want a fish to take to school. Fish Day will be no fun for me. (No clear relationship between these two sentences.) Or "Hello, hello, who said hello to me (and there is no mention anywhere that anybody said "hello" to Ben).So his question seems incomprehensible to the child who is trying to read for meaning.

Restricted language also makes reading comprehension difficult:

> Sue saw Tom. Tom was crying. What is the matter Tom. She asked. What happened to your toy?

This is not normal six-year-old language. Limiting pronouns and repeating noun phrases is unnatural. Or in the use of the article: Where is the tiger. We have come to see a tiger. Using "the" once and then "a" really throws a child off in terms of comprehension, because we do not talk that way. The only way to make reading comprehension easy for the child is to make reading easy. And messing around with the natural language patterns is not going to do that.

We must make reading as meaningful as possible so that the children can make sense out of it. No one can rely on a program to teach reading comprehension. Reading does not lend itself to this type of "program." Further, a word by itself is meaningless unless it forms part of a chunk of meaning. The teacher can make reading easy by making sure that the material the child is asked to read is meaningful and by not interfering with the learning process by confronting him/her with nonsense. Children who cannot understand certain materials or activities in school from which they are expected to learn to read and comprehend often do not have a reading problem at all. They have a "school" problem.

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